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The dilemma in Nicaragua

WASHINGTON — A tragedy is taking place in Nicaragua, and we are combating it by playing footsy. The bright promise of an egalitarian democratic revolution has been replaced by the brutality of a clumsy, corrupt and incompetent dictatorship.

The Sandinista regime cannot provide food or soap for its people, and it blames the CIA. It drafts its young men into political gangs to bully its domestic foes and an oversized army to menace to its neighbors. It censors its press, rigs its elections and brays about freedom. It has bad breath and needs a shave.

The Reagan administration fulminates against these unattractive bullies and bumbleres with volcanoes of apocalyptic rhetoric: "It is a Communist totalitarian state and it is not a government chosen by the people," President Reagan said Thursday night.

"Basing themselves on strong military ties to Cuba and the Soviet Union, the Sandinistas are attempting as rapidly as they can to force Nicaragua into a totalitarian mold whose pattern is all too familiar," Secretary of State Shultz said the next day. "They are suppressing internal dissent, clamping down on the press,

persecuting the church, linking up with the terrorists of Iran, Libya and the PLO and seeking to undermine the legitimate and increasingly democratic governments of their neighbors."

All too true. Not necessarily every word or every detail—but true enough. Even former romanticizers of the Sandinistas admit that they long ago turned ugly.

But the Reagan administration's solution is trivial: \$14 million more in aid to the contra guerrillas—"our brothers," Reagan calls them. If we don't finance the freedom fighters and let them fight back, Shultz says, we will be enacting into American law the Brezhnev Doctrine: Once a country goes Communist, it stays Communist.

"Those who would cut off these freedom fighters from the rest of the democratic world are, in effect, consigning Nicaragua to the endless darkness of Communist tyranny," Shultz says.

This represents progress in the administration's approach. It is being

honest. It used to insist it only wanted to stop the Sandinistas from shipping guns to El Salvador. Now it admits it doesn't like the Sandinistas, period.

But it is making its pitch against a background of dishonesty and cries of "wolf!" that have turned Congress sour and skeptical. Past U.S. funds have gone to cutthroats who committed atrocities against Nicaraguan peasants in the name of anti-communism. Against the law, the CIA took part in the mining of Nicaraguan harbors. A CIA comic book distributed by the contras advocated assassination of Sandinista officials.

Even in his new desperate appeal for aid, Shultz dissembles on a key question: "The Sandinistas denounce their opponents as mercenaries or former national guardsmen loyal to the memory of (former dictator Anastasio) Somoza . . . The new fighters for freedom include peasants and farmers, shopkeepers and vendors, teachers and professionals."

They also include cutthroats, mercenaries and former national guardsmen loyal to the memory of Somoza.

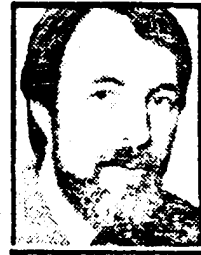
Just because the Sandinistas make the charge doesn't mean it's not true.

If the administration would dump the cutthroats, it might find that it has the makings of a bipartisan compromise that could solve its Nicaragua problem. It could approach Congress and say, "Give us the \$14 million—and we'll clean up the contras' act. We'll bounce the Somozistas. No more paying for atrocities, rapes and shooting of prisoners."

If Shultz is right—that the new Nicaraguan freedom fighters are all genuine battlers for democracy—there is no need to keep funding the old guard of corrupt Somoza bandits. Republicans and Democrats who have become squeamish about supporting the dirty covert war could then vote the money with a clean conscience.

A well-financed, genuinely democratic and popular insurrection might put enough pressure on the Sandinistas to split President Daniel Ortega from the Marxist-Leninist Interior Minister Tomas Borges. If Ortega sees U.S. Republicans and Democrats uniting to support a truly non-Somozist opposition, a deal could be made.

Reagan can solve this, with a little imagination.



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